

Low Thia Khiang's decision a boost to party renewal that will also impact PAP: Observers

Channel NewsAsia, 4 November 2017

Workers' Party (WP) chief Low Thia Khiang's decision to step down as secretary-general by next year took many political analysts by surprise, given that he managed to stave off a leadership challenge by fellow Member of Parliament Chen Show Mao just last year.

However, they agreed that the move will be a "boost in the arm" for the party, creating a buzz among Singaporeans while allowing it to inject new blood and fresh ideas for the next and more important phase of development.

Associate Professor Eugene Tan from the Singapore Management University (SMU) said there had been no indication that Mr Low, who would have led the party for 17 years before he steps down, was going to make such an announcement.

But he believes party renewal has been well in place for many years.

CHANCE FOR YOUNGER MEMBERS TO STEP UP

"If you look at the party's Central Executive Council (CEC), with the exception of (MPs) Png Eng Huat, Sylvia Lim and Low Thia Khiang, the rest are all below 50," Assoc Prof Tan pointed out.

"Mr Low has been taking the opportunity to build new and younger faces with the Non-Constituency Member of Parliament (NCMP) system. He could have continued with Gerald Giam (as NCMP), but looking at it from the long-term, it might have been better to put in a new face as well."

The WP's three current NCMPs are Daniel Goh, Dennis Tan and Leon Perera.

Assoc Prof Tan said that in many ways, Mr Low has been stepping away. He ceded town council matters first to Ms Sylvia Lim and then to Mr Pritam Singh.

"In the lead up to the dinner yesterday, the interviews were fielded by the younger members," said the SMU law don.

He added that it is also unlikely that Mr Low will "walk into the sunset". Instead, his stepping down would provide the party with the benefit of having a man with his influence and expertise, while injecting new blood and new ideas for an "increasingly post-independence electorate".

Deputy director of research at the Institute of Policy Studies, Dr Gillian Koh, also said the announcement came as a surprise to her, given that Mr Low, at 61, is still "in fighting form".

She said the strategy could be aimed at exciting more Singaporeans to join its ranks "while being in this area of vulnerability."

Dr Koh was referring to the lawsuit against Mr Low, Ms Lim and Mr Singh filed by the Aljunied-Hougang Town Council's (AHTC) independent panel over alleged improper payments.

The question to ask, Dr Koh said, is why Mr Low is stepping down while he, Ms Lim and Mr Singh are still in the middle of the lawsuit.

“There are three ways of viewing it. Is he leaving a sinking ship?” Dr Koh put forward.

“Secondly, is he leaving to take responsibility for the issue, and in this case, will there be further announcements about Ms Lim and Mr Singh so that they will not be a further liability to the party?”

“Thirdly, (perhaps) there was a division of opinion about the way forward, and we saw it in this week’s announcements that the party will take a different strategy by abandoning the older one associated with Mr Low in being a check and balance on the government, and by refreshing the ambition of being an alternative to the People’s Action Party (PAP) government”.

NEXT SECRETARY-GENERAL WILL NEED TO GO BEYOND POLICY CRITIQUING

Assoc Prof Tan agreed that the AHTC lawsuit is “an albatross” around the party’s proverbial neck.

But he said the party seems to be of the position that it is not going to let the lawsuit derail the overall plan of putting the party in a good position to form an alternative government over the next few general elections.

And with this “proclamation” as Mr Low has indicated in a series of interviews in a new commemorative book marking the party’s 60 years, the gears will need to shift, said Assoc Prof Tan.

For one, they will need to be able to present viable policies. He said while the party has started this to some extent, they are still in a “critiquing (of current policies) mode”.

“If you want to talk about forming an alternative government, winning another GRC, people would want to see you function more than just as a mere check and balance,” he said.

“They’ll want you to be able to say ‘this is our vision, (this is) how we will do it and we’ll show you it’s possible’.”

Assoc Prof Tan said that while it is difficult for any opposition party to be able to “match” the ruling party’s ability in formulating policy due to a lack of access to information and the public service, this is something that will be an important matter in the next secretary-general’s agenda.

Dr Koh shared similar sentiments, noting that with a total of nine MPs and NCMPs from WP, people expect the party to do more. A few other party members, including former MP Lee Li Lian and former NCMPs Gerald Giam and Yee Jenn Jong have also gained parliamentary experience.

“With nine people, they can quite easily farm out the different portfolios for the existing ministries and properly present alternative plans to the PAP government now,” Dr Koh said.

“Because they’ve just celebrated their 60th anniversary, put out a publication, it’s a good time to say what are the new things they are going to do, present you this great ambition, shiny new faces and put out the idea that they are refreshing the party altogether.”

And it’s a great way to present something else in the media than what we’ve had the last few years, which is the legal troubles they have in Aljunied-Hougang and previously Punggol East, which they still have to respond to.”

THE IMPACT ON PAP’S OWN LEADERSHIP TRANSITION

While it is still anyone’s guess as to who Mr Low will hand over the party reins to, Assoc Prof Tan said the front-runners at the moment are Ms Lim and Mr Singh.

“Chen Show Mao’s style has waned quite a bit not just within parliament but also within the party,” he said.

“So I would be surprised if he would mount another challenge. I would say party members will look closely at Sylvia Lim and Pritam Singh and to see who might be the best person to lead party into next phase of development.”

Among the two, Assoc Prof Tan said Mr Singh may have a slight advantage due to his age, if the party is looking for a secretary-general who could lead for more than 10 years, or between two and three electoral cycles.

Assoc Prof Tan also pointed out Mr Low’s “impeccable timing”, first with Mr Low’s move to stand in Aljunied GRC in the 2011 General Election, and now with the announcement on stepping down by next year.

He said Mr Low is possibly one of the best political strategist amongst all the parties, including the PAP.

“The Workers’ Party may be smaller - they don’t have the control of government, so obviously they can proceed faster,” Assoc Prof Tan said.

“But in 2018, there will be a new leader in the Workers’ Party. The question is, in 2018, will the new PAP leader be known? I don’t think so.”

While party renewal is not a contest of who announces first, Assoc Prof Tan said the question the ordinary Singaporean will ask is why the ruling party has taken so long with party renewal.

“The ordinary Singaporean is not going to go through the intricate analysis and say oh, they are different parties etc,” he said.

“And it doesn’t help with the PAP saying ‘we take party renewal very seriously. Every election, we are already planning for the next renewal’. And so the question then is, come 2018, we are still none the wiser as to who is going to be our potential Prime Minister from the PAP.”

Assoc Prof Tan said as discussions among both party members and the public go into overdrive, the question of a successful handover as WP chief is not just about who takes over, but how it is done.

With so much at stake, the party may want to make it as smooth as possible, closing ranks and agreeing on a consensus candidate even if in an election.